



10 December 2007

02/01/08

Ms. Chris Gavigan  
Assistant Chief Executive  
Local Government Management Services Board  
Floor 2  
Cumberland House  
Fenian Street  
Dublin 2

**Performance Verification Under Towards 2016 (June 2007 – February 2008)**

Dear Ms. Gavigan

I refer to your correspondence dated 31 October 2007. The following is my narrative report as requested. In preparing the report I have considered the Action Plan agreed by our Partnership Committee earlier this year and explored the areas that have been developed in accordance with the Action Plan and *Towards 2016*. I am pleased to report that significant progress has been made in a number of areas, which I outline under the headings you suggested.

*Enhanced Customer Service*

All of the initiatives undertaken by the staff of Offaly Local Authorities have as their ultimate goal an improved customer service.

The Partnership committee are examining a number of areas with a view to improving the way the customer interacts with the Council. The areas being explored include the setting up of a dedicated customer service desk, a review of office opening hours, review our Communications Policy and a review of parking arrangements at our headquarters in Tullamore.

The sub-committee charged with examining the opening hours issue have reported to the Management Team. The report's proposals around lunchtime opening is being piloted at our offices in Edenderry: council administrative offices in Edenderry are now open during lunchtime, as is the branch library, which has increased its opening hours from 26 hours per week to 35 hours per week. Birr library has also improved its service with longer opening hours.

I have also asked the Partnership Committee to consider the issues around the setting up of a dedicated customer desk section within the county council, which will provide a single point of contact for all customers who call to our offices. The proposed

customer service desk will also monitor the effectiveness of our customer service and identify, on an ongoing basis, initiatives to improve our services to the public.

The Planning Department has demonstrated its commitment to its customers; staff have facilitated a large number of consultation meetings with the public and local interest groups following the publication of an issues paper whilst drafting the new County Development Plan. In recognition of the importance of the planning process the Planning Department have published a *Planning Information Pack*. The pack includes a step-by-step guide outlining the planning process and provides clear information on all aspects of the planning application, e.g., maps, notices, fees, appeals etc. The pack is designed to be accessible to all customers and uses plain language in an easy to read format. While the pack is primarily aimed at those applying for planning permission, it is also of use to agents. The development of rural housing guidelines to supplement the information pack is also nearing completion.

#### *Co-operation with other agencies*

The Community and Enterprise Section supports and facilitates the Interagency Social Inclusion Measures (SIM) Group of the Offaly County Development Board (CDB). In 2007 the SIM Group developed a Local Anti-Poverty Strategy (LAPS) for the County. The LAPS is an interagency strategy that will be used by the SIM Group and all agencies in Offaly to influence and focus their work on the broad poverty/exclusion issues within Offaly.

The development of the LAPS was a priority action for the Offaly CDB and was adopted at their October 2007 meeting. Offaly County Council, in its role as facilitator of the CDB and the SIM Group, led the development of the LAPS and has a key role in the implementation of a number of actions.

Offaly County Council together with Offaly Community Forum, An Garda Síochána, and other member agencies of Offaly CDB have identified information sharing and partnership on crime prevention as a priority joint action over the coming years. The establishment of the Joint Policing Committees earlier this year is delivering a consolidated approach to addressing local concerns and issues.

Offaly and Westmeath County Councils forwarded the Midlands Gateway Innovation Fund submission to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The submission was developed by Offaly County Council and Westmeath County Council in conjunction with the Gateway Implementation Forum, membership of which includes senior local authority staff, elected representatives, the main statutory agencies and the Midland Chamber of Commerce.

Senior management of Offaly County Council continues to drive and facilitate National Development Plan initiatives through their direct involvement on interagency committees. By jointly prioritising and developing key initiatives under the National Development Plan, the Council strives to ensure that the economic, social and cultural benefits of the NDP continue to be realised in Offaly.

### *Development of Shared Services*

Offaly Local Authorities are committed to exploring how internal efficiencies can be achieved by shared services. During this reporting period progress as been made in the following areas:

- Birr and Tullamore Town Councils are both Housing Authorities. An exercise involving staff working in these areas has identified areas that can best be delivered on a countywide basis. The initial functions that are now being delivered on this basis include the private rented inspection function and the traveller accommodation capital programme.
- The refurbished offices in Birr centralises the service delivery for Birr Area, Birr Town Council and the Birr library service at one location. The Council's Sectoral Action Plan includes a commitment to examine additional services that can be delivered from there.
- An examination of the role of Birr Town Council revealed that certain functions which are also carried out by Offaly County Council (including payroll, superannuation and creditor payments) may be centralised at Offaly County Council headquarters. Meetings to progress the sharing of these services will be held with relevant staff and, where necessary, with the trade unions.
- In July 2007 the Council introduced a Central Debt Collection section. Staff monitor customers' debt and have introduced an automated debt reminder letter to customers. To date the initiative has reduced the non-domestic water arrears by about a third of the original debt. The Council is finalising its proposals with regard to the Revenue Collection function and it is proposed that revenue collection will operate on a countywide basis.

### *Staff Training & Development / PMDS*

A core objective of the Human Resources Plan for 2007 was the development of a more structured and focused approach to staff training and development. For the Local Authority to bring meaning to its corporate objective 'valuing our greatest resource – our staff' then there is a need to provide appropriate and effective training for all staff.

The Performance Management Development System has been implemented throughout the organisation. Its benefits can be seen through the production of Team Plans and through a greater appreciation by all staff of the organisation's corporate goals and objectives.

The co-ordination of the PMDS process has been assigned to the Partnership Facilitator. The Management Team have agreed that successful mainstreaming of the process is now imperative if the benefits are to be sustained. A timeframe for the PMDS processes has been agreed and coincides with the annual budget. Each directorate is charged with the production of business plans for their functional areas by 31 January 2008; individual Personal Development Plans are to be concluded by

16 February 2008; and the corporate team plan, having regard to identified training needs, is to be adopted by the Management Team by 31 March 2008. The alignment of PMDS with the overall strategic goals of the organisation and with staff development plans will enable the organisation to focus on key areas for development in 2008.

Training needs identified during personal development meetings, and through the induction process, are collated through a training needs database. The database immediately highlights compulsory health and safety training requirements. A matrix of courses that specific staff grades should avail of have been identified and the Training Officer prioritises and organises these training courses.

The Council recognises that further third level education benefits the individual and the organisation and have adopted a Scheme of Educational Assistance for employees who propose to undertake third level courses. Currently, thirty-seven employees are benefiting under this scheme.

In 2007 the Council carried out preparatory work for their submission under the FÁS sponsored *Excellence Through People* accreditation. The application is being finalised and it is expected that our assessment will be in the first quarter of 2008. The application process has required the Council to examine in detail its human resources and corporate processes. A Communication Strategy and Employee Assistance Scheme have been developed through Partnership as part of this process.

The Council has reached the required spend on training for General Operatives and Related Grades for 2007. The non-national road grant was claimed in full and the Council has secured additional funding of €50,000 from FÁS during 2007.

#### *Organisational change and innovation under T2016*

I initiated a review of our procedures for managing housing maintenance. The review is considering methodologies for tracking and dealing with housing maintenance requests and more effective use of resources. In addition, the relative responsibility of Housing HQ and Areas is being considered, as well as the option of dividing housing maintenance into two sub-programmes: urgent/emergency; and planned maintenance. My objective is to have a consistent countywide approach to the service and ensure that the planned maintenance programme reduces the need for urgent maintenance and pre-letting repairs.

The OffalyEyes information portal is a recent initiative aimed at utilising the vast amount of local knowledge possessed by the staff of Offaly County Council. It recognises that the knowledge possessed by staff is a valuable information tool and can contribute positively to the organisation's decision making processes. OffalyEyes is a web based programme and is being piloted on our intranet. This programme will allow staff to log their observations under eight different categories. Those observations are then emailed to the relevant Area Office for their attention. Area office staff include the observations in their workload plan. Given the time of year, dark evenings, etc. the category for the pilot is 'Road Lighting'.

#### *Value for Money / efficiency / effectiveness*

The Council is extremely conscious of its budget restrictions and the need to achieve value for money. A county with a traditional low rates base and a reluctance to increase rates means that discretionary funding is always at a premium. Accordingly, the achievement of efficiencies and effectiveness remains a key priority for all sections.

Management continue to promote the concepts of value for money and budgetary control. Web-based Financial Management Reports and checks have been introduced. These allow budget managers to run, view and print their own reports and ensure that budget coding is correct. A new database was designed and implemented to allow for the more effective monitoring of capital expenditure, including the tracking of Government claims from invoicing through to receipt.

The Housing Department procured Quantity Surveying services in 2007 to advise on tender document preparation and final accounts claims. This has reduced scope for 'extra claims' by contractors.

In 2007 we developed a risk management policy and are finalising a corporate risk register. Risk management focuses specifically on identifying and accessing local authority risks and ensuring they are effectively managed. In 2008 we intend to further develop this process and to evaluate outcomes.

In 2007 we will have had in excess of 100,000 motor taxation transactions, an increase of 5% on 2006 levels. A high percentage of our transactions see customers taxing their vehicles on a *quarterly* basis. This brings additional expense on the customer as well as being an additional drain on council resources. In 2008 we will be launching a Motor Taxation Information Guide Book and distributing leaflets to encourage the use of online Vehicle Tax service. Mobile internet accessibility computers have been made available to the public in Edenderry and Birr libraries. We intend to promote this facility for people who do not have internet in their homes, thereby enabling more of the public to use on-line local authority services.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the initiatives outlined in *Towards 2016* are being achieved in Offaly. The Council continues to benefit from the support of the Partnership process, industrial harmony is being maintained and, as a result of the on-going co-operation with modernisation and change programmes outlined in the agreement, the Council's core objectives and strategies are being realised.

Yours sincerely



Pat Gallagher  
County Manager